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MORDECHAI AND FLOWING MYRRH: ON THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book of Esther makes no direct reference to God. Nevertheless, many readers have identified possible hints of divine agency. Mordechai confidently declares that the Jews will be saved, and he suggests that Esther merited royalty just in order to advance that salvation (Esth. 4:14). Esther initiates a three-day fast, ostensibly to elicit divine support (4:16). And a remarkably fortuitous series of events contributes to the victory of the Jews.¹

I wish to note a striking inner-biblical parallel that, building on a broader, long-acknowledged correlation, offers further evidence of the story's affirmation of God.

Scholars observe a set of correspondences between the palace in Shushan and God's temple. Only these two structures feature a *hatser penimit* ("inner court") and a *hatser hitsonah* ("outer court").² The Bible uses the term *birah* to describe just two locations: the Fortress of Shushan and God's abode.³ Some colors/materials that adorn the Persian palace, especially *tekhelet* ("blue wool") and *argaman* ("purple wool"), occur most distinctly in connection with the Israelite sanctuary.⁴ The phrase *osei ha-melakhah*, denoting individuals who perform official tasks, appears

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¹ An extensive summary of these and other arguments appears in Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: Second Edition with a New Postscript on a Decade of Esther Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 235–47. For additional sources see the literature cited there and, more recently, in chapter 8 of Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

² Esth. 4:11; 5:1; 6:4; Ezek. 44:17, 19; passim.

³ Esth. 1:2; passim; Neh. 2:8; 7:2; 1 Chr. 29:19.

⁴ Esth. 1:6; Exod. 25:4; passim.

only in relation to the temple and the Persian court.⁵ Unsolicited entry into the king's inner court results in death, as does forbidden entry into the inner sanctuary of God's dwelling.⁶ And together with other parallels, the presence of "drinking from golden vessels and other assorted vessels" at the banquet of Achashverosh (Esth. 1:7) recalls the feast of Belshazzar, whose participants drink from "golden vessels" plundered from the Judean temple and pay homage to the gods of gold and other assorted materials (Dan. 5:3–4).⁷

This expansive correlation suggests that the palace in Esther stands in place of the house of God. Taken together with the absence of the divine name, this inference yields one of two conclusions:⁸

1. The Persian court has displaced God's presence entirely, so that the Jews must survive in a setting that is irredeemably bereft of any divine connection.
2. This faux sanctuary *threatens* to displace God, leaving the exiled Jews—already distanced from God's abode—to confront an existential *and religious* danger.⁹

I contend that the evidence favors the second alternative, which maintains an affirmation of God. By way of introduction, consider the following passage in the Talmud:

⁵ 2 Kings 12:12; 22:5, 9; Neh. 11:12; 13:10; 2 Chr. 24:13; Esth. 3:9; 9:3.

⁶ Esth. 4:11; Lev. 16:2.

⁷ Cf., with variation, *Megilla* 11b. The relevant formulations in Esther and Daniel, moreover, both feature ambiguity concerning whether any of the drinking vessels were fashioned out of the non-golden materials. For parallels between Esther and Daniel more generally see, inter alia, Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xl. Regarding the other parallels between the Temple and the Persian court (apart from the parallel involving the phrase *osei ha-melakbah*), see Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and Hidden Reading* (Siphrut 6; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 22–24; Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 100; Yoel Bin-Nun, "The Scroll of Reversal" [in Hebrew], in *Hadassah bi Ester: Sefer zikkaron la-Hadassah Esther (Dassi) Rabinovitch z"l: Kovets ma'amarim al Megillat Ester*, ed. Amnon Bazak (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tevunot, 1997), 47–54; and Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908), 138–39.

⁸ Koller, too, links the book's omission of God's name to its references to the Temple (*Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 99).

⁹ Consider, in this connection, the assertion in the Talmud (*Megilla* 12a) that the decree against the Jews resulted from their participation in the party held in the royal palace.

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“In place of the brier, a cypress shall rise; in place of the nettle, a myrtle shall rise” (Isa. 55:13): “Instead of the brier,” [that is], in place of the evil Haman who made himself into an object of foreign worship, [. . .] a cypress (*berosh*) shall rise, that is, Mordechai, who is called the *rosh* (“choicest”) of all the spices. For [the text] says (Exod. 30:23), “You shall take the choicest (*rosh*) of the spices: *mor-deror*”—[an expression that] the Targum renders *marei dekhei* (“pure myrrh”).¹⁰

(*Megilla* 10b)

Although the genre of this passage is midrashic, the text of Esther indeed alludes to the quoted verse in Exodus. Fascinatingly, it also contains genuine evidence of this Aramaic wordplay, whereby the name Mordechai corresponds to the phrase *marei dekhei*.

Right after the text introduces Mordechai and Esther it describes the gathering of maidens in Shushan, who spend a comically long time preparing to service the king:

When each maiden’s turn came to go to King Achashverosh at the end of the twelve months’ treatment prescribed for women—for thus would be completed the period of cosmetic treatments: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with fragrances and women’s cosmetics [. . .]. (Esth. 2:12)

The phrase “for thus would be completed the period of cosmetic treatments” (*ki ken yimle’u yemei merukehen*) generates one of the book’s oft-noted parallels to the Joseph story. After Jacob dies, Joseph honors him by commissioning a forty-day process of embalming—“for thus would be completed the period of embalming” (*ki ken yimle’u yemei ha-hanutim*; Gen. 50:3). By contrast, the analogous phrase in Esther depicts the objectification of the living: the women are merely bodies to be cultivated for the king’s pleasure.¹¹

But consider the remainder of the verse, whose deeper significance has gone unremarked: “six months with oil of myrrh and six months with fragrances and women’s cosmetics.” This line strongly recalls the verse in Exodus cited in the Talmud, which describes the anointing oil (*shemen ha-mishbah*) that consecrates the furnishings of the *mishkan*:

You shall take the choicest of spices: five hundred measures of pure myrrh, half as much—[that is], two hundred and fifty—of fragrant cinnamon, and two hundred and fifty of fragrant cane.

¹⁰ My renderings of the biblical text bear the influence of the NJPS translation.

¹¹ Cf., inter alia, Grossman, *Outer Narrative and Hidden Reading*, 61–62.

In both Exodus and Esther, the prescribed ingredients consist of myrrh on the one hand, and substances explicitly called *besamim* (“fragrances”) on the other. The verse in Esther, moreover, uses the unique phrase “oil (*shemen*) of myrrh,” recalling the term *shemen* that describes the mixture in Exodus. Most important, in both verses, the myrrh and *besamim* each compose a half of a greater whole. In the case of the anointing oil, 500 measures of myrrh combine with 500 measures of *besamim* (250 of fragrant cinnamon and 250 of fragrant cane), for a total of a thousand.¹² And the process in Esther calls for applying myrrh and *besamim* for six months each, totaling a year.¹³

This parallel, more than the other analogies to the house of God, underscores a sharp opposition: instead of sanctifying the furnishings of the *mishkan*, these ingredients join together on the bodies of the objectified women of Persia. The passage in Exodus, furthermore, referring three times to this “sacred anointing oil” (*shemen mishbat kodesh*), affirms that its eternally hallowed formula may not be duplicated for other purposes or applied on human flesh (Exod. 30:25–33). In Esther, then, the application of these substances on the women of the harem grossly violates the formula’s sanctity.

Now if our book means to exclude God entirely, then this connection to the anointing oil pushes the point to a remarkable extreme. It would be one thing to depict a reality where God is utterly absent, the temple has been displaced, and the Jews contend successfully with the consequent challenges. It would require a far more audacious agenda, however, to portray such a repugnant *violation* of the sacred without offering any mitigation of that violation. Even without further argument, a different explanation seems more likely: the story intimates a theological message, whereby Mordechai and Esther not only help save the Jews but also push back against the desecration perpetrated in this would-be substitute for God’s temple.

With this in mind, we return to Mordechai’s name. Whereas the anointing oil is said to contain *mor-deror* (“flowing/pure myrrh”), the parallel

¹² This is the apparent straightforward meaning of the verse in Exodus, an interpretation that the Esther text seems to support. For a discussion of alternatives in rabbinic literature, see recently Chaim Sunitzky, “Parshat Ki Tisa: The Anointing Oil Revisited,” at <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2016/03/parshat-ki-tisa-anointing-oil-revisited.html>.

¹³ To be sure, the ensuing verse in Exodus adds two other ingredients to the mixture. The connection, however, remains far too strong to be coincidental. In Esther too, moreover, the text alludes to additional cosmetics that the maidens apply along with the *besamim*.

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text in Esther uses the alternative designation *shemen ha-mor* (“oil of myrrh”). Would not the actual phrase *mor-deror*, however, have yielded a more straightforward parallel to the formulation in Exodus? The explanation, I submit, lies in a subtle opposition that the book of Esther generates. When the maidens apply the hallowed substances on their bodies, they defile the sacred formula, thereby denying it the purity signified by the word *deror*. The name Mordechai, by contrast, which the narrator introduces just beforehand (Esth. 2:5), bears a neat correspondence to the phrase *mor-deror*, the word *dekhei* (“pure”) later serving as the translation of *deror* in several targumim (*Mordekhai = mor dekhei*).¹⁴ Thus the text, playing on this name as it does on others, underscores how Mordechai—along with Esther who, we are pointedly told, shuns any active interest in the beauty aids of the harem (2:15)—opposes the sacrilege of the Persian royal court.¹⁵

It emerges, then, that the story’s Jewish protagonists do not merely ensure the welfare of their people. More fundamentally, they stand for the sacred purity that characterizes Israel’s divine temple. Their ascent to power, accordingly, marks not just the salvation of the Jews but also a triumph of the God of Israel who, although hidden from view, engineers a victory for both his nation and its *religious* legacy.

¹⁴ Onkelos, the Peshitta, and the Samaritan Targum all feature this translation. We should also not rule out the possibility that the rendering in Onkelos reflects an eastern tradition that dates back to the period of Esther’s composition.

¹⁵ Regarding wordplay in Esther that involves names and foreign terminology, one illustrative example, noted to me by R. David Silber, concerns the hanged conspirators Bigtan and Teresh (Esth. 3:21–23). These royal courtiers bear correspondences, respectively, to the baker in the Joseph story who is hanged for his offense against Pharaoh and to the cupbearer who is spared that fate (Gen. 40:1–22): the name Teresh plays on Hebrew *tirosh* (“fresh wine”), and the name Bigtan evokes the Persian loan-word *pat-bag* (“food”); cf. Dan. 1:5–15, a passage partially modeled on that episode in Genesis, which contains five occurrences of *pat-bag*.